DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 405 963 PS 025 097

AUTHOR	Dohoney, Jo M.; Reiling, Denise
TITLE	Homeless in Michigan: Voices of the Children. A Report from KIDS COUNT in Michigan.
INSTITUTION	Kids Count in Michigan, Lansing.
SPONS AGENCY	Annie E. Casey Foundation, Baltimore, MD.
PUB DATE	96
NOTE	25p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Kids Count in Michigan, 300 North Washington Square, Suite 401, Lansing, MI 48933; phone: 800-837-5436; fax: 517-371-4546; e-mail: HN0809@Handsnet.org ($5 plus tax).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Childhood Needs; *Children; Disadvantaged Youth; Family Environment; Government Role; *Homeless People; *Housing Needs; Poverty; State Government
IDENTIFIERS	Family Support; *Michigan

ABSTRACT

Because homeless children are often a hidden group, staying with friends or relatives for brief or long periods, and occasionally spilling into the roughly 150 private emergency shelters and domestic violence programs in Michigan, their numbers are difficult to define. This Kids Count! study interviewed 25 children of 25 homeless families residing in homeless shelters in Michigan. Rather than being a statistical profile of homeless children, the purpose of the interviews was to gain understanding of the human dimension of child homelessness. The interviews revealed several issues related to child homelessness, all centered on loss: of privacy, of a sense of belonging, of certainty, of family and other relationships, of status, of free time, of trust in parental power, and of belief in a safe world. Among all the families interviewed, the primary cause of homelessness was the lack of adequate income to obtain and keep decent housing. Results suggest that the best strategy for reducing homelessness is to help families maintain stable housing in safe neighborhoods. The conclusion includes a discussion of implications for the long-term impact of homelessness on the state of Michigan and policy options addressing some of the most pressing problems and issues in this study. (WJC)

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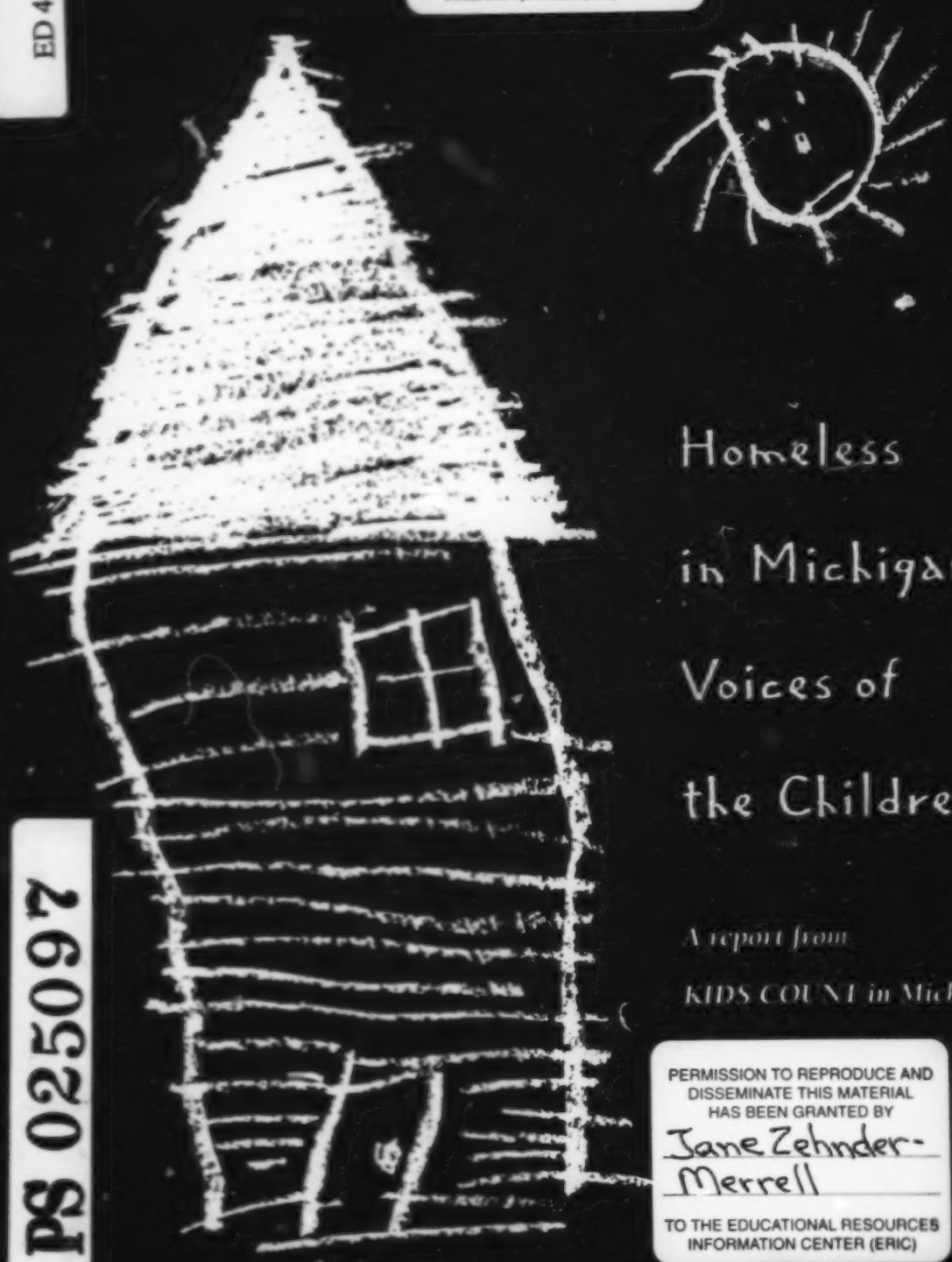

Homeless in Michigan: Voices of the Children

A report from KIDS COUNT in Michigan

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- **Michigan's Children**, a statewide, multi-issue, independent, broad-based advocacy group which works with policymakers, other organizations and the public to improve the quality of life for children and their families.

- **Michigan League for Human Services**, a statewide citizens' organization which seeks to improve human services through research, information dissemination, advocacy and support services to the state's charitable organizations.

This report was written by Jo M. Dohoney and Denise Reiling who also interviewed the families and shelter providers.

Additional copies of this report are available for $5 (plus tax) from:

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Design donated by: The McNenly Group, Inc., Lansing, MI
Printed by: Lawson Printing, Battle Creek, MI

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Homeless in Michigan: Voices of the Children

A report from

KIDS COUNT in Michigan

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Foreword

THIS STUDY DOES NOT ATTEMPT TO COUNT THE NUMBER OF HOMELESS CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IN MICHIGAN. BECAUSE THEY ARE OFTEN A HIDDEN GROUP, STAYING WITH FRIENDS OR RELATIVES FOR BRIEF OR LONG PERIODS, AND OCCASIONALLY SPILLING INTO THE ROUGHLY 150 PRIVATE EMERGENCY SHELTERS AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PROGRAMS IN MICHIGAN, THEIR NUMBERS ARE DIFFICULT TO DEFINE.

No one knows precisely how many of the state's youth share the experiences articulated so dramatically by the children interviewed for this study. In 1996, about 8,306 of the 10,514 beds in Michigan's shelter system are available for homeless children and their parents, according to the *Michigan Consolidated Plan for Housing and Community Development*. They are filled almost every night. This capacity has expanded exponentially with the overall growth in the shelter system since the early 1980s. In just one year, from 1989 to 1990, requests for family shelter increased by an average of 17 percent in the 30 cities surveyed by the U.S. Conference of Mayors. Social service workers in rural areas also report growing numbers of homeless or near homeless families.

In the 1994-95 school year, the Michigan Department of Education estimated that approximately 140,000 of the state's school children experienced homelessness. Although children under five years old and not yet in school are excluded from this count, the higher poverty rates among this age group suggest preschool children are at an even higher risk of homelessness.

The pages that follow suggest that for each family in a shelter, there are dozens more "on their way" to the shelter – doubling up with friends or relatives, in situations which cannot be sustained indefinitely.

And, while the reasons for homelessness vary, lack of sufficient economic resources to keep a safe and secure roof over the family's head are at the root of virtually all family dislocations. Families with economic resources were not found in the shelters studied. ■

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IF. . .

YOU COULD BE ANYTHING OR ANYBODY

IN THE WHOLE WORLD,

WHAT [OR WHO] WOULD YOU BE?

[RESPONSES FROM CHILDREN IN MICHIGAN EMERGENCY SHELTERS]

"I'd work where my Auntie works, where they make furniture, 'cause then they would give me money there...and I could put the money in my zipping pants, so I don't lose it...then we could have our blue house back, 'cause we would always have money."

[A FIVE-YEAR-OLD BOY]

"...a judge."

[A TWELVE-YEAR-OLD GIRL]

"I'd be the wind, 'cause the wind's the second most powerful thing, 'cept for God...it's more powerful than the sun, which is the third most powerful, 'cause it can blow clouds in front of the sun, and make the world dark, and make the sun so it can't burn nobody."

[A TWELVE-YEAR-OLD BOY]

"...an endangered species, 'cause then I'd always be protected."

[A THIRTEEN-YEAR-OLD GIRL]

"I'd be the Mutant, 'cause the Mutant can heal himself whenever anyone hurts him, and don't need nobody to help him heal. If someone cuts him bad, or if someone hits him real hard, he can just grow a new place."

[A THIRTEEN-YEAR-OLD BOY]

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Introduction

THE OLD ADAGE WAS THAT CHILDREN SHOULD BE SEEN, BUT NOT HEARD. IN THIS DAY, HOWEVER, THE VOICES OF CHILDREN DO COUNT. THE PAGES THAT FOLLOW ARE FILLED WITH THE VOICES OF HOMELESS CHILDREN – OF HOW THEY EXPERIENCE LIFE WITHOUT THEIR OWN HOME, WITHOUT THEIR OWN FOOD, WITHOUT THEIR OWN BEDS, WITHOUT THEIR OWN PLAYTHINGS, WITHOUT THEIR OWN PETS, WITHOUT THEIR OWN NEIGHBORHOODS, WITHOUT THEIR OWN SCHOOLS, WITHOUT THEIR OWN FRIENDS, WITHOUT MEMBERS OF THEIR OWN FAMILIES, WITHOUT PRIVACY, WITHOUT SECURITY, WITHOUT PEACE AND WITHOUT THEIR OWN SPACE. ■

The purpose of interviewing homeless children was to understand the human dimension of child homelessness, rather than provide a statistical profile of homeless children.

■

PURPOSE

This report puts the voices of the children first, since – in actuality – children are often the last to be heard, if they are heard at all. Their mothers' voices are also included, as they speak of their children's experience. [Most families with children in shelters are headed by a mother.] This report is organized into the themes that emerged in conversation with homeless children currently housed in shelters. The primary emphasis is on how children experience homelessness, and their families' responses to their shelter needs. For most families interviewed, months or even years had already been spent in virtual homelessness – in make-shift living arrangements, often "doubling up" with relatives or friends of the family – before coming to the shelter.

To capture the voices of homeless children in Michigan, semi-structured interviews were conducted with children and mothers currently residing in homeless and domestic violence shelters during the summer of 1995. The interviews were conducted in five Michigan counties in different regions of the state.

The purpose of interviewing homeless children was to understand the human dimension of child homelessness, rather than provide a statistical profile of homeless children. While this report does not represent the experience of all homeless children, it does present the varied impact of homelessness on children in many different families.

DESCRIPTION OF SHELTERS

The shelters in this study ranged in capacity from accommodations for five families to a maximum of fifteen [48 persons]. They varied in housing style from dormitory "night-only" accommodations to private living quarters for each family. Most of the shelters served individuals as well as families. Very few shelters could accommodate two-parent families due to the limitations of physical space. Some shelters were located in buildings previously used to house a single sex population so housing fathers, step-fathers or older brothers was not possible. [Some shelters housed male children as young as age seven separately from the family.] The majority of shelters visited had insufficient space to meet the existing need of homeless families.

Available services ranged from minimal emergency shelter and food services to a variety of other services such as job skills training designed to "transition" the homeless into self-sufficiency. Almost uniformly absent were transportation, child care and children's programming.

The typical homeless family in the shelters consisted of a mother and one or two children. Most of these families had been homeless long before reaching the shelter.

■

DESCRIPTION OF FAMILIES INTERVIEWED

Twenty-five families were interviewed. Of the fifty children in those families, twenty-five children consented and were old enough to be interviewed. Those children interviewed ranged in age from three to thirteen years old, but most were between four and ten years old. Interview structure and questions were geared to each child's developmental stage. Almost all interviews were tape-recorded to ensure the accuracy of the children's expressions.

The typical homeless family in the shelters consisted of a mother and one or two children. Some were single mothers in their twenties with preschoolers in domestic violence shelters, others were older with school-age children. Often the older children in the families we interviewed were not living in the shelter but with a relative or family friend.

Among all the families interviewed, the primary cause of homelessness was the lack of adequate income to obtain and keep suitable and safe housing. Reliable transportation, a steady job, child care, and affordable safe housing form the components of stable family life. When resources are not adequate, disturbance in one of these elements disrupts the other components and results in loss of housing. These families had no supports to maintain housing or income if a partner became violent, if the car broke down, if their child care arrangements fell apart, if health problems arose, if substance abuse was a problem, if lay-off or job loss occurred, if the landlord wouldn't fix the dangerous wiring, or if the neighborhood became too dangerous. When the fragile structures supporting their lives collapsed, these families lost their jobs or their housing or both.

Most of these families had been homeless long before reaching the shelter. Results of our interviews with homeless families support previous studies which suggest that shelters are a last resort.[1] The families interviewed had moved at least once, and up to ten times, *before* coming to a shelter. Doubling up with relatives or

"JANIE" IS A BRIGHT FOUR-YEAR-OLD.

We played on the floor while she described in detail the home her family had left, due to unsafe wiring and unhygienic conditions. She described the toys she had owned, her bed, her closet, her sister's bed, and all the things she used to do there. She took the crayons and began to recreate the apartment, making rooms and describing them. She was very proud of the fact that she would clean her room to help her mother and described where in her closet different things would go. Her three-year-old sister says to her "roaches" and she looks up at me, making her eyes wide and whispers in a confidential tone of voice that "it had roaches and mices."

■

friends, who are often also poor, was usually the first, second, and third recourse to obtain temporary housing. Such arrangements, sometimes more permanent than temporary, often led to conflicts over space, resources, behavior, or just general tension. These issues, if not resolved amicably, often result in the family's being asked to leave. Once its supportive social networks are exhausted, the family eventually ends up in a shelter.

While domestic violence victims tended to average five attempts to leave their abusive relationships, other families also experienced episodic homelessness for extended periods. Several of the families interviewed had lacked their own housing for two to three years, and had used shelters two or three times, as well as extended visits with many of their kin and friends. This disruptive and nomadic existence in a child's formative years weakens social ties to neighborhood and community. Additionally, several studies have demonstrated the links between childhood residential mobility, educational disadvantage, and higher dropout rates.[2]

The Experience of Homelessness

Children interviewed in summer 1995 experienced homelessness in Michigan differently depending upon their age and developmental stage. And quite logically, infants and very young children's experiences differed from older children's. One mother of a five-year-old reported that her child "...thinks we're on vacation, or just visiting with folk...he likes living in a new church every week, and riding the bus all day long, looking for a new place. But then...it's only been a short while, and he's really too young to understand never going home."

Older children were better able to understand and express their reactions to their changed living conditions. Mothers described children with increased anger, more frequent temper tantrums, deepened dependency, and escalated anxiety and worry.

Some mothers reported that their children lacked a conception of what "homeless" means because they did not have a point of reference, having experienced homelessness for extended periods of their lives and from a very early age. One mother had been without a fixed "home" since her three year old was born. Another mother with three children, ranging in age from three to six, was able to count ten periods of homelessness in the lifetime of her three-year-old child. Some mothers reported that they feared their children would come to accept their condition [of homelessness] and their uncertainty as normal. One mother recounted her "horror" at finding her child "playing shelter" in the same way that children "play house."

Much of the sharing by homeless children and their families in interviews involved loss: the loss of a place to call home created many other losses, such as privacy, certainty, place attachments, and comforting family rituals and routines. These losses often occurred long before a family arrived in the shelter. Homeless children in shelters are likely to have "doubled up" a number of times in several moves, each resulting in another set of losses. Some children in domestic violence

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shelters, however, have sometimes encountered dramatic and sudden changes in their housing by going directly from their "family" home to a shelter.

Children experience several negative consequences as a result of successive doubling-up arrangements before entering a shelter. First, some children had experienced as many as ten moves in only a few years, not allowing the child to develop an identity associated with a place which provides a secure sense of self in the world. Second, the children experienced the loss of valued possessions and relationships. One child angrily described how "they threw away my bestest toy box and I'm gonna go back and get it some day." When personal or familial relationships are strained or broken, children may feel acute guilt or grief. One mother reported her toddler cried each night for his grandpa, in whose home they had last lived.

Doubling-up increased the vulnerability of these children to physical abuse. One six-year-old child described being picked up by the throat and choked by an adult housemate in a dispute over soda pop. [This child was awaiting a court date where his attacker would be tried.] Parents hinted at fears that their children had been abused while doubled-up. Whether the strains were physical or emotional, doubling-up often resulted in aggravated stress and renewed homelessness for these families, rather than a respite during which they could establish independent housing.

Loss of Privacy

Few children could express how they had come to be homeless, but they were certain of the consequences of that displacement: the loss of much of what they had known and enjoyed in their lives. Much of what was grieved was the loss of private physical space. The children often mentioned missing their rooms. Most children began by saying that what they missed about home was their own bed and their own playthings.

Many also mentioned missing other private spaces, particularly the bathroom, but also the kitchen. For one boy, being homeless meant not being able to play on the swing set that had been in his backyard. While drawing pictures during his interview, he created several pages of swing sets. [On one swing, he drew a child and identified it as himself, then changed his mind, and wrote the name of one of his siblings under the swing, explaining that he still lived there.]

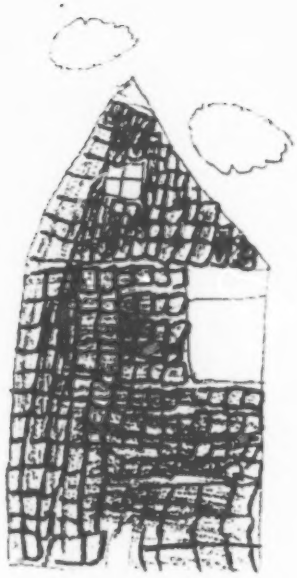
Most children reported being quite bothered by having to sleep with "strange" people nearby. One ten-year-girl said, in ascending decibels, the biggest difference between the shelter and being home was "there are people living here that I never met in my life." Another ten-year-old girl reported that she didn't like using the large shelter bathroom, and that she always tried to "hold it." She went on to say that she didn't like taking a bath, because in the bathroom, "...people are always looking at me." This loss of control over physical space and loss of privacy was a strong and consistent theme for both the children and their mothers. Communal bathrooms, often some distance from the sleeping areas, resulted in anxious moments, particularly for smaller children.

"MARTY" IS A THIRTEEN-YEAR-OLD BOY.

He is currently in a family shelter with his younger sister and his mom. They have been homeless for more than three years, usually staying with relatives "until things get real bad." Marty knows that the family's stay at this shelter is nearly over, being close to the thirty-day limit. He says he does not want to leave because it's "the nicest place we ever had." Marty is considering trying to live with his father, although he does not know him very well. Marty's sister is afraid to go live with their father, but Marty thinks he will be OK because he is "not a girl."

■

Shelters providing "private" bedrooms often needed to put entire families into one bedroom and sometimes even two families into a bedroom. This arrangement left the children with no private space. Because some homeless children experienced increased frustration or anger, they needed, yet lacked, a place to go and privately deal with their anger. This lack of control over space was a particular problem for children who, under the best of circumstances, tend to have little in life that they control. One boy drew his future three-story home, complete with a large attic, which he divided for his mother and sister, while he reserved the first two floors for himself.



Loss of a Sense of Belonging

The children also talked about the loss of their neighborhoods and their schools, and a wide range of familiar sights and sounds that had been part of the fabric of their lives. These children had lost not only a home, but also a sense of belonging to a place and a community. Children require primary place attachments which provide them with an identity and a comforting social network. Home and school are two primary place attachments for children.[3] Particularly for young children, a change of residence often means a change in school or neighborhood as well. Lacking a home, a neighborhood and a school, homeless children have no place they can say they are from. Pretending to be "just visiting or moving around for the summer" appeared to be a common coping strategy which these children used to save face. Children without long-term ties to neighborhood communities and schools will be less likely to have a reservoir of "social capital" or social networks on which to rely. This lack of social supports threatens their future emotional and economic well-being.

Loss of Certainty

Most of the children interviewed appeared to be uncertain about why they did not have a home of their own, but several children indicated "...havin' money would fix it."

Children expressed their uncertainty about many other aspects of their lives as well. They were uncertain about where they would live next, and whether that would be a place they liked as much as their last home. They expressed a great deal of uncertainty about what had happened to valued objects such as toys and clothing that had been left behind when they moved or were evicted from their last home. This occasioned some worry for the children who wished to be reassured that those objects were being stored somewhere for the future moment when they would again have a home. One thirteen-year-old girl worried that someone else was wearing the clothes she left behind.

In the interviews, these valued objects loomed large – having some valued belongings maintains a sense of safety and security. The more a family had moved since becoming homeless, the less the child could be certain of where favorite toys were and whether they would ever reappear. Some children were certain of the whereabouts of their favorite toys, having watched others take them or throw them away as part of the eviction process.

Children of school age were also uncertain about where they would be going to school and therefore who their teacher would be and who their classmates would be. This created anxiety for the children who found the prospect of getting used to a new school and new teachers and classmates daunting. A ten-year-old girl who had been homeless six times, but always during summer vacation, was torn between wanting her mother to stay away from her abusive father and wanting to return to the school that "...I went to all of my life." She expressed anxiety over being teased as the "new kid" if her mother was successful in her plans to move to another state. Uncertainty about the school they would attend was strongly connected to friends. Many of the children were uncertain about where their old friends were and also about whether they would ever see them again.

Most children did appear to be certain about their present circumstances of shelter life. They demonstrated certainty about the shelter services and rules. This sense of certainty and stability offered these children some benefits. Many mothers appreciated the fact that the shelter offered their children some routine, as opposed to the often chaotic conditions of doubling-up with family or remaining in an abusive situation.

Due to the time limits for stays which most shelters currently must enforce, time spent in shelters offers only a limited source of certainty and security. If housing is not found within a 30-day period, or if the housing found does not turn out to be stable and secure – also a strong probability – the children were likely to experience homelessness, and uncertainty, again. On the other hand, transitional programs, where available, allow stays as long as 24 months, although the average stay lasts about eight months.

The level of uncertainty in these children's lives became more apparent when they were asked to describe their future, where they might be living someday, and how this might occur. Most children could not conjure up a future, or vacillated between a belief that a new home was very possible in the future, and a belief that "nothin' is gonna change."

SOME CHILDREN WISHED FOR FUTURES WHERE "...I'D BE A RICH PERSON AND THEN I COULD BUY WHATEVER I WANTED... A CAR, A LIMO, A SUPER NINTENDO, A SWIMMING POOL, A COMPUTER,... I'D BUY MY MOM SOME JEWELRY AND MY BROTHER SOME BASEBALL CARDS."

Some children, however, were actively trying to create certainty and security by trying to control their present circumstances. One eight-year-old boy thought he "...could make money to help my Mom, 'cept we're in this shelter, and I can't make money here. I used to mow lawns, rake leaves, sell walnuts and stuff, but I can't do that here." Many expressed a desire to make money to help out. Another child, about eight-years-old, out of concern over their 30 days coming to a close, reported that he had been trying to help his mom by scouting for housing while on school outings.

"PAUL" IS EIGHT YEARS OLD.

Sometimes he sounds like an old man. He has moved several times in his short life. The familiar and comfortable dimensions in his life have shrunk to his relationship with his mother. He has no home; his siblings are living elsewhere; and his toys were thrown away or taken by others. He patiently described the complete schedule that must be adhered to in the shelter, rattling it off like a poem he has learned. His mother filled in the details of the tasks she had to accomplish within that schedule. Paul summarized those points of conflict most important to him by reporting: "I can't watch Saturday morning cartoons here and my Mom never reads me a story before bed anymore."

■

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Loss of Family Rituals and Routines

Living in the homes of others and in shelters forces families to accommodate other living patterns. Families cannot follow their own routines and rituals that cushion and secure the daily lives of most children.

Most shelters have created rules and schedules to facilitate communal living for large numbers of people. The kinds of schedules varied, but most had set hours for bedtime, rising, cleanup, meals and recreation. Most shelters stipulated that children must be with parents at all times during the day. In one shelter, children were not allowed in the kitchen, so scheduled tasks like cleaning the kitchen were done by mothers after children's bedtimes. In other shelters, parents had to remain in the bedroom once their children were put to bed.

How the children experienced food routines in the homeless shelter depended upon the type and structure of the shelter. The constraints of physical space and numbers of residents determined the extent to which shelters could respond to the needs of families regarding food and its consumption. In a shelter which provided independent living units, the mothers were able to prepare food privately according to accustomed routine and schedule. Some shelters provided shared kitchen space where families could cook and eat in family units. This arrangement preserved family routines but occasioned some disputes over food supplies, with some mothers complaining that their food was consumed by others. Both in doubling up and in shelter living situations, children reported being reprimanded for mistakenly having gotten into "those other people's stuff."

The freedom to eat when hungry or when a craving struck represented an important area of loss for homeless children, whether housed with relatives or friends or living in a homeless shelter. Children missed eating in familiar and comfortable places ["...I used to have my own chair in the kitchen"], and missed having familiar foods prepared in accustomed ways. Families in shelters lose a private place for the family's own food supply and the security that goes with having a cupboard or refrigerator.

Many children and parents recounted stories of unpleasantness, and in one case violence, which occurred over food. Most of the incidents appeared to have happened when "doubling up" with relatives or their mothers' friends. One child said that "...it just hurt real bad 'cause Auntie wouldn't let us eat, and we were always to blame for having no food in the house. And when we got home from school, we couldn't eat anything 'til our Ma got home, even though those other kids [the child's cousins] were eating." Another family described being asked to leave a friend's home after a dispute over orange juice. One mother expressed simply not being "...able to bear seeing my kids have to go hungry 'til I got home from work, and then me having to feel like I was begging to have a little food for my kids, that my money paid for anyway."

The children appeared to have no way to respond to this loss of a central family function. The mothers shared the ways they tried to compensate for this loss with their children. In shelters with more communal meal preparation and service, some mothers would look for opportunities to "feed" their own children. On one occasion when a staff person began to distribute a snack to the children, the mothers chose to distribute the snack themselves. Another mother, in a "night only" shelter, reported

that rather than use the packed lunches the shelter gave them, she would walk with her children to the grocery store and use her food stamps to buy small quantities of fresh fruit, vegetables, and cheese for her children's lunch. Having devised a way of making a plastic bag into a colander so that the food did not touch the "filthy sink," she would wash the food in the store's bathroom; the family would then eat their meal in the park. This mother said it was better for her children "...to see that Momma's still able to take care of them."

These are not trivial actions, for the giving of food is an important emotional, as well as physical, aspect of the traditional maternal role of nurturing children – especially young children. Such nurturing, taken for granted by children in a home setting, strengthens family relationships; its absence weakens a child's sense of family security.

Bedtimes represent another critical family ritual disrupted by homelessness. While bedtimes can be a point of contention in many homes, homeless children find that they must now live by other's rules. In a shelter setting, children resented shelter bedtimes – often 8:30 regardless of age – and limited or prohibited TV. Evenings spent together as a family watching a favorite program were missed.

Family outings, previously taken for granted, took on new significance when absent during periods of homelessness. Going out for ice cream, to a movie, or to the beach were now luxuries.

Loss of Family and Other Relationships

Children also expressed grief over lost contact with immediate, as well as extended, family. Displacement from the physical structure of "home" quite frequently disrupted relationships with family members as well as with friends. Some of these separations were the natural consequence of being physically away from a place and some resulted from splitting the family unit in order to secure housing. Often older children opted not to go to a shelter if other alternatives were available. Many of the breaches in extended-family relationships occurred due to the relationship being strained by having to "double-up" with these family members, prior to staying in the shelter.

Some children were placed with other family members or friends, because there was not sufficient room for the entire family to be doubled up in one place or there was a better chance of getting into a shelter by reducing the family size. One mother reported that "...it was just too hard moving around with all three children, so I left the oldest [a six-year-old boy] with his grandma." Another mother reported she had been able to keep her family of three children together until their latest need for shelter. Because the shelter did not have room for the entire family at that moment, she had sent her two youngest children back to their father, although he had abused her.

Some families were split up due to the distress a child experienced in the shelter setting. Several mothers reported refusal to stay in the shelter by an older child, often due to the stress and stigma of being homeless in a "...strange place... 'Cause when you're with Grandma or Auntie, you're just visitin', you know." Another stated that her "oldest did not want to come to shelter with us so he is with his grandmother until we find a place."

"MARK" IS EIGHT YEARS OLD.

His mom became homeless when her car broke down, leading to the loss of her job and their apartment. Mark misses his older brother who is staying with a paternal grandmother in another state. Eyes aglow, he says that they spoke by telephone on the previous night and his brother told him all about where he was staying. His serious demeanor returns when he states that the grandmother said "she wished she could take me too." Mark also misses his old neighborhood and school, and the friends he "used to have over."

■

Several families reported that a child had not been able to "...hold up living here in the [shelter]" and had instead insisted on staying with an extended-family member or a friend.

AS ONE SIX-YEAR-OLD SAID OF HER TWELVE-YEAR-OLD SISTER, "...SHE DIDN'T WANT TO BE HERE ANYMORE. SHE WANTED TO STAY WITH OUR AUNTIE, SO SHE COULD HAVE FUN... I'M NOT HAVING FUN HERE, BUT I CAN'T GO WITH AUNTIE. MY SISTER NEEDED TO GO."

This child's mother explained that her older daughter had left the shelter because she [the daughter] had "...broken down, and just couldn't take it anymore." One twelve-year-old girl reported being concerned about having to live with her father, but had decided that living with her father was better than continuing to live with her mother who had no resources. She anticipated that living with her father was going to be "...real bad, real bad." Parents who split their children among various forms of shelter reported feeling they had no good choices among the alternatives, and they worried about their children.

"...'cause I like the streets better here. I can be out without any trouble. I've never had a place like this before."

■

Due to the pressure on limited shelter resources in most communities, many emergency shelters require homeless families to exhaust every possible alternative before being accepted. Families reported having "doubled up" with a variety of relatives and friends before entering a shelter. Since doubling-up often occurs with a family member or friend only marginally better off than the homeless family, these accommodations strain even strong relationships and increase the vulnerability of children and their parents to abuse.[4] Many told painful stories of broken family relationships and lost friendships which resulted in another move for the family.

LOSS OF STATUS

Children experience a genuine loss of status when they lose their home. Children may not know what "stigma" means, but they recognize its effects. One ten-year-old child hoped that her family would find a house before school started, because she was planning to pretend that she and her family had simply spent the summer "...being on vacation a lot and traveling around." On the verge of entering junior high or middle school, this girl was particularly conscious of the fact that her present status would be a social impediment. Most children interviewed regretted losing contact with their friends, but didn't want to try to talk to friends in their present circumstances. Some of the older children in particular expressed a reluctance to reveal their current situation.

The effects of stigma also occur in the neighborhood. The attitudes of neighbors to residents in homeless shelters can be intensely negative. While one of the families was in the backyard of the shelter, a neighbor in the next yard offered an obscene gesture. Shelter residents reported that similar incidents, including verbal assaults, occurred frequently. One neighbor expressed displeasure with that "half-breed shelter," indicating that "The neighborhood... didn't have... that type of folk" before the shelter opened. Even where shelters are a well integrated part of the neighbor-

hood, the children still are stigmatized. One mother reported that neighborhood kids came to the shelter's play yard and beat up the children. In telling this story, this woman shook her head and said, "I know it shouldn't be that way, but it is."

Fortunately, service providers were themselves quite aware of and sensitive to the problems. One shelter's staff with a brand new van proudly painted the shelter logo on it. The staff immediately removed the logo, however, when the children did not want to be let out near the school. As one staff member put it, "If they don't know what it means to be a shelter kid, be assured that the other kids at school will let them know." Other staff reported that one of the greatest treats for the kids was being able to go somewhere in a car, "just like other kids," rather than go as a group in a shelter van.

Loss of Free Time and Play

Homeless children not only lose cherished playthings, they also lose time and place for play. As one mother noted, "...being homeless is a full-time job." Unfortunately, homeless children reported that their days were largely devoted to accompanying their mom to look for a house, going with mom to social service agencies to arrange for assistance and housing, and dealing with a mom who's distressed and distracted. The physical and emotional exertion involved in moving around from place-to-place demands the time and energy of all family members.

In doubled-up situations where space is cramped and quarters communal, children – especially older children who may be noisier and more active – are likely to be limited in either time or space to play. Some shelters lack adequate resources to foster play or provide children's programs or child care. Having no staff to be responsible for the children, these shelters have instituted what the mothers referred to as the "24-7 rule": children must be with their parent and in their parent's sight 24 hours a day, seven days a week – the only exceptions being limited play sessions in some shelters. For homeless children, play becomes more constrained, less likely to occur in a natural daily rhythm. One child became concerned because she "forgot" that she wasn't supposed to be playing with the blocks unless it was playtime. Another child expressed great urgency in needing to know the time, as he was waiting for the time when the playroom would be open.

Opportunities for play were further constrained by the ability of the children's mothers to take the children to a place where they could play, and by their mothers' availability to supervise their play.

Given the mothers' typical schedule of shelter duties, looking for housing and trying to arrange for needed assistance, while also juggling transportation schedules, it was not uncommon that children had no playtime. Staff in shelters with restricted or nonexistent outdoor play areas scheduled visits to nearby playgrounds, but supervision and liability issues strain shelter resources. According to providers, grant applications must often be submitted to separate funding sources to cover such expenses, and this effort represents another time-consuming process for limited staff resources and therefore is not always undertaken or successful.

"KATHLENA" IS A TEN-YEAR-OLD GIRL.

She has experienced homelessness at least six times because of domestic violence. Kathlena expressed a sense of violation by having to stay in a shelter living next to people "...*I never met in my life!*" Having gone through being the new kid in school during other separations from her father, Kathlena expressed conflicting desires to see her mother be successful in ending the marital relationship but also to be able to return to the ..."school I went to all of my life." She wants her mother to move them to another state, away from her abusive father, but fears adapting to another new school.

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MANY MOTHERS EXPRESSED THE FRUSTRATION OF TRYING TO FIND SAFE AND SUITABLE HOUSING FOR THEMSELVES AND THEIR CHILDREN, WHILE AT THE SAME TIME FEELING THEY HAD "CREATED THE SITUATION" BY VOLI'NTARILY LEAVING SUB-STANDARD HOUSING:

"...house was all messed up [landlord] cut my water off, so went to court for it... didn't have a refrigerator... bathroom floor was goin' in."

■

"...was just cold in there, my heat was just goin' out... didn't have money for application fees for somethin' else, now got over here and my car's messed up... so now I'm without a car and a house."

■

"People just don't want to live in some broken-down shack ... we need decent places to live... I won't raise my kids in places like that."

■

Loss of Trust in Parental Power

Parents are the ultimate "security blanket" for most children; the child depends upon them for safety and for shelter. All homeless children, regardless of age, are likely to view their homelessness as a loss of their parents' power to protect them and provide a safe haven. Even though the children themselves did not articulate in a straightforward manner that they were aware that their mother could not keep bad things from happening, it was clear that they had prematurely discovered that their parents were not able to protect them. For children from abusive homes, this perception often predates the homelessness; for other homeless children, this realization comes after the onset of homelessness. In both cases, the realization that their parents are not able to provide them with the protection they need heightens their insecurity.

The average child, faced with a threat to safety or security, will invoke the power of a parent as a shield from harm. Largely absent from the children interviewed were assertions of what their mothers would do to rectify the homelessness. Instead, when asked what they think needed to happen for them to acquire a new home, the response was often "dunno." A few children fantasized about how they would get a future home, but their parent was not a prime actor in the fantasy. Instead, the fantasy involved the child having power to help their mother acquire housing.

Children interpret the shelter rules and schedules that both children and parents must adhere to as an additional loss of parental power. One girl reported, "It doesn't matter what my mom says, the shelter says I have to go to bed at 8:30!" While this was only a half hour different from her accustomed bedtime, it was important to the girl, who mentioned it several times. This concern that shelters' regulations may undermine the parental role is echoed in other studies of homeless families in shelters.[3]

Parental power is diminished in homeless families in another important way: their children are constantly exposed to the parent's private grief and distress. The mothers reported feeling depressed, anxious, and otherwise stressed by their situation. In the process of becoming homeless, many reported having suffered hurts to other family relationships, and to their own self esteem, and these mothers lacked the privacy within which to grieve, feel sad, or cry. Mothers were deeply concerned that they could not shield their children from their grief. "If I'm crying, he's crying."

The children were also keenly aware of their mother's stress and sadness. While being interviewed, children often looked at their mothers before responding. One pair of siblings who had expressed very deep feelings of anger and hurt in their artwork, did not share such emotions in front of their mother. Another child sadly said that his mom was different, because "...she doesn't put lipstick on any more," something she had done in happier times.

These mothers recognized the problems their children were facing, but they also realized that they had little freedom and few resources to alleviate the child's distress. The changes observed in their children included increased resentment, trouble handling anger, sadness, increased dependence, nightmares and bedwetting.

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Loss of a Belief in a Safe World

One of the most powerful and disconcerting themes to emerge from interviews with homeless families was the children's loss of a belief in a safe world. Mothers often reported becoming homeless to remove their children from an unsafe environment. Some shelter providers said that new resident children often demand to be shown the locks on the doors and other security features so that they can feel somewhat safe. Access to shelters rescues children from domestic violence, unsafe, and substandard living conditions, or violent neighborhoods – their parents do not have the resources to rescue them any other way.

In domestic violence shelters, mothers said that the repeated episodes of abuse and subsequent homelessness had left them feeling quite devalued and full of self-blame "...for always getting right back into it...their [abusers] names may be different, but the pattern's all the same." One woman indicated that many people make "bad choices," but the children do not suffer the same consequences if the family is not poor. One mother had even come to the point of defining having a man in her life as "...a luxury I just can't afford anymore, 'cause it always puts us out."

Several mothers had attempted to remedy substandard housing by bringing legal action against the landlords. Some, however, reported having learned "the hard way" about "legal" remedies. One woman reported that she and her children were evicted for failure to pay rent, as she had been deliberately withholding the rent in an attempt to force the landlord to make the necessary repairs.

Escaping violence in neighborhoods was also a common theme. A mother in a rotating shelter said: "[it has]...been the best place we've been, 'cause it's real safe here. You don't have to worry about anything, no one shooting at night. Even in my blue house, I had to do drills with my kids, like fire drills, only these were shooting drills. I taught them how to get under the tables. But here, they take you to churches at night to sleep, and those are real safe. Even being out on the streets during the day's not so bad, 'cause the neighborhood's real good. We go to the library most of the time. The best thing's getting away from the dealers on the streets. They don't have any respect for families, you see. They'd approach me for drugs or sex or whatever right there in front of my kids."

A thirteen-year-old boy did not want to leave his current shelter placement, "...'cause I like the streets better here. I can be out without any trouble. I've never had a place like this before." A five-year-old girl said that the best thing about living in the shelter was that "...you have to have permission to come in here. The door has a big lock, see, and a TV on the door, and you can't come in here unless someone says so. And we only let good people in."

"Tommy" is an active eight-year- old.

He expressed his need for play and freedom of movement. Home to him meant being able to "explore the house." He missed his bike, his friends, his room and his tent. Tommy disliked the shelter because he lacked the freedom of both time and space a home provides. His eyes lit up when he told of a staff member taking him with his sister to the beach and to the Dairy Queen- an outing that would have been taken for granted if he had a home, but which now was special under their restricted circumstances.

■

Conclusion

CHILDREN IN HOMELESS FAMILIES EXPERIENCE MANY LEVELS OF LOSS. THE LOSS OF PLACE WHICH PROVIDES TIES TO SCHOOL, FAMILY AND FRIENDS IS THE FIRST OF MANY. THIS LOSS OF PLACE ALSO OFTEN MEANS CHILDREN LOSE FAVORITE TOYS, SPECIAL MEMENTOS AND OTHER TREASURES. THESE SOCIAL, PHYSICAL, AND EMOTIONAL LOSSES ACCUMULATE AS HOMELESSNESS BECOMES A WAY OF LIFE. INTANGIBLE LOSSES OF PRIVACY, CERTAINTY, FAMILY RITUALS AND ROUTINE, IMMEDIATE AND EXTENDED FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS, STATUS, FREE TIME AND PLAY TIME, AS WELL AS A BELIEF IN A SAFE WORLD ALSO FUNDAMENTALLY THREATEN THE SECURITY OF THEIR "CHILDHOOD."

AND AS MORE MICHIGAN FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN FALL INTO POVERTY, THEY WILL BE INCREASINGLY LESS ABLE TO PROVIDE SAFE AND STABLE HOUSING – A GROWING NUMBER OF CHILDREN WILL SHARE THE EXPERIENCES OF JANIE, MARTY, PAUL, MARK, KATHLENA, TOMMY AND LAURA. THE SUSTAINED AND SEVERE LOSSES EXPERIENCED BY HOMELESS CHILDREN AND RECOUNTED BY THESE FAMILIES, MAKE IT IMPERATIVE THAT STRATEGIES BE IMPLEMENTED TO REDUCE HOMELESSNESS AMONG THE STATE'S CHILDREN. ■

A five-year-old boy expressed his hope that their next house would have bars on the windows like his last house [which his mother left due to the violence in the neighborhood], "...'cause with bars, nobody can get in."

■

IMPLICATIONS

As is evident from these interviews with homeless children in Michigan, the best strategy for reducing homelessness is to help families maintain stable housing in safe neighborhoods. The cost to the well-being of these particular children of living in unstable and unsafe housing has been starkly illustrated in the interviews recounted in this report, but the long-term impact will ripple through the state's economy as these youth grow into the workers and citizens of the 21st century.

Lack of attention to the current housing needs of low income families in Michigan places more children at risk of school failure and high school dropout. Many studies have documented the link between low income, frequent housing changes and educational performance. Children from low income families [at or below $10,000] change schools three times as frequently as those in families with incomes above $25,000. Children who change schools frequently are at least twice as likely to repeat a grade and have math and reading skills below grade level. Children who change schools four or more times by the eighth grade are at least four times more likely to drop out than children who remain in the same school.[7]

According to dropout statistics submitted by the state's school districts for the 1994-95 school year, 29,000 youth left high school without a diploma that year [7.1 percent of the state's high school population]—a 46 percent increase from the 1991-92 rate.[8] The steadily rising rate of child poverty in Michigan—more than one of every five children in 1992—suggests the dropout rate will continue to rise.

POLICY OPTIONS

Certainly the problem of homelessness among children is embedded in many broad social and economic trends shaped by policy and funding allocation decisions, so these options represent only a few strategies to address some of the most pressing problems. They evolve primarily from the issues raised by the families interviewed in the summer of 1995.

■ More realistic income supports

Helping families to maintain stable housing in safe structures in healthy neighborhoods is the best option, but requires a system of more realistic income supports – including an adequate number of family supporting jobs for parents who can work and a reasonable level of public assistance for those who cannot.[8] Increased emergency assistance would also help to keep families housed. [Since 1991, funding for emergency assistance in Michigan has been reduced by half.][9] Shelter facilities lack the resources to provide the support services families with children need in order to allow them to make a successful transition to stable housing.

■ Enforcement of housing codes

Stronger enforcement of housing codes would also improve the housing available to low-income families and prevent homelessness. Shelter providers and residents indicated that landlords of substandard housing preyed upon the working poor and the welfare poor, who have few other options but to rent unsafe housing. It was suggested that if the Michigan Department of Social Services refused to vendor rent to landlords directly for housing which is not up to code, housing improvements would be more likely to occur.

■ Increased supply of affordable housing

At the same time, safe housing at an affordable price for low income families is in short supply and needs to be expanded. Increases in the number of low-income renters and a sharp decline in the number of low-cost housing units has resulted in a shortage of affordable housing for a growing population. At the same time, most qualified families seeking subsidized housing in Michigan are placed on long waiting lists. [10]

"LAURA" IS A TWELVE-YEAR-OLD GIRL.

She currently comes to the domestic abuse shelter with her mother and brother for the counseling sessions they provide. Her father was abusive to all members of the family, and the mother had hoped to leave him as soon as she was eligible to receive SSI payments. During this delay their family dog killed a goose in the yard. After several days, her father insisted that Laura dig a hole in the frozen ground to bury the carcass, even though he knew that she did not want to touch it. Unable to dig the hole or to otherwise dispose of the dead goose, she ran away out of fear of her father.

■

One mother said that the time she stayed in her home "was the worst, a nightmare. I'll never do that again." Instead, she moves her family between a shelter and the homes of friends while she waits for help to materialize to ensure her safety. Currently, she is only safe at her job, because there her co-workers look out for her.

■

■ Timely response to program applicants

Current income support programs need to be as timely as possible in their response to applicants. One family fleeing domestic violence would have fled sooner but the SSI application required 90 days for processing. The mother suffered more abuse during the delay, as did the children, until the daughter ran away, forcing the mother to face the imperative to leave. Similarly, families applying for Aid to Families With Dependent Children [AFDC] can wait up to forty-five days after applying before eligibility is determined. Such delays may mean the family will face eviction. The retrenchment in emergency assistance programs has meant that families with children in this situation are less likely to get temporary help in meeting their immediate needs during these waiting periods.[11]

■ Access to legal aid

Improved access to legal aid to families undergoing domestic violence or negotiating with landlords could allow the families to remain safely in their homes. Poor enforcement of restraining orders [and lack of punishment for their violation] often makes staying in the home not an option for victims of domestic violence.

■ Easier access to shelter system

The total exhaustion of resources prior to shelter entry may serve to diminish the potential success of a homeless family after leaving the shelter. Homeless families need help from a variety of informal resources in order to become self sufficient.[12] And indeed, many mothers reported hoping that the next formal placement following their shelter stay "worked," because they had "worn out" their welcome with friends and relatives. One child reported that they couldn't go back to his grandmother's, as she was "...still mad at us." If shelter entry were easier and less stigmatizing, families would not have to wait until they had experienced extended periods of homelessness before receiving shelter services. And, they would still have some informal support systems available to help them become self-sufficient upon leaving the shelter.

■ Increased availability of child care and transportation

If shelter providers are to accommodate families with children, they need the resources to provide child care and transportation.

■ Longer shelter limits for families with children

The limits on the length of stay which most emergency shelters impose are often too brief to enable a family to get on its feet. Shelter limits tend to be thirty days which sometimes can be extended another fifteen days. Providers and residents tend to agree that thirty days is often too brief for families, whose barriers to becoming self sufficient can be more complex to remedy than those of homeless individuals without children.

Endnotes

[1] Shirley P. Thrasher and Carol T. Mowbray [May 1995]. "A Strengths Perspective: An Ethnographic Study of Homeless Women with Children," *Health and Social Work* 20[2]: 93-101.

[2] Roger D. Colton [October 1995] *A Road Oft Taken: Unaffordable Home Energy Bills, Forced Mobility and Childhood Education in Missouri*. Belmont, Massachusetts: Fisher, Sheehan and Colton Public Finance and General Economics and [1991] *The Forced Mobilitiy of Low-Income Households: The Indirect Impacts of Shutoffs on Utilities and Their Customers*. Boston, Massachusetts: National Consumer Law Center. ■ U.S. General Accounting Office [1994]. *School-Age Children: Poverty and Diversity Challenge Schools Nationwide*, and *Elementary School Children: Many Change Schools Frequently, Harming Their Education*, Washington, D.C. ■ David Wood *et al*, "Impact of Family Relocation on Children's Growth, Development, School Function, and Behavior," *Journal of the American Medical Association* [September 15, 1995], pp. 1334-38. ■ Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur [1994]. *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Howard University Press.

[3] Leanne G. Rivlin [1990]. "Home and Homelessness in the Lives of Children," in Nancy Boxill, ed., *Homeless Children: The Watchers and the Waiters*. NY: Haworth Press: 5-18.

[4] Diana M. Pearce [May/June 1995]. "Living on the Edge: Doubled Up Families in America," *Poverty and Race* 4[3]: 11-12, 18.

[5] Thrasher and Mowbray; *op cit*.

[6] *Kids Count in Michigan 1995 Data Book*. Lansing, Michigan: Michigan League for Human Services.

[7] Roger D. Colton [October 1995]; *op cit*.

[8] The income support through AFDC hasn't been increased in Michigan since 1990. The 1996 grant for a parent and two children is $459 a month, which represents cash support at less than half the poverty level. Over the last ten years [1986-1995], the purchasing power of this AFDC grant has eroded by 29 percent. Currently, the entire grant – expected to take care of all the family's basic needs other than that portion of their food which can be purchased with food stamps – barely covered the lowest fair market rent [$342] on a modest two bedroom unit in 1995. [These amounts, which include utilities, are determined by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development on a county basis; the fair market rent in the densely populated southeastern counties of Wayne, Macomb and Oakland is $574.] The roughly 361,000 children in Michigan's AFDC families [January 1996] are thus placed at considerable risk of homelessness by the pressure of rising housing costs and falling real value of the AFDC grant.

This risk for many families was exacerbated by the institution of the "flat grant" in 1992 which eliminated an extra increment of $100 a month for roughly 23,000 of the state's families who were trying to meet their mortgage payment during the period they were experiencing hard economic times and dependency upon the AFDC program. This policy change in Michigan was significant, given the historically higher incidence of home ownership in Michigan, including among the unemployed; the AFDC home ownership rate was twice the national average in 1992 [10.2 % vs. 4.4%].

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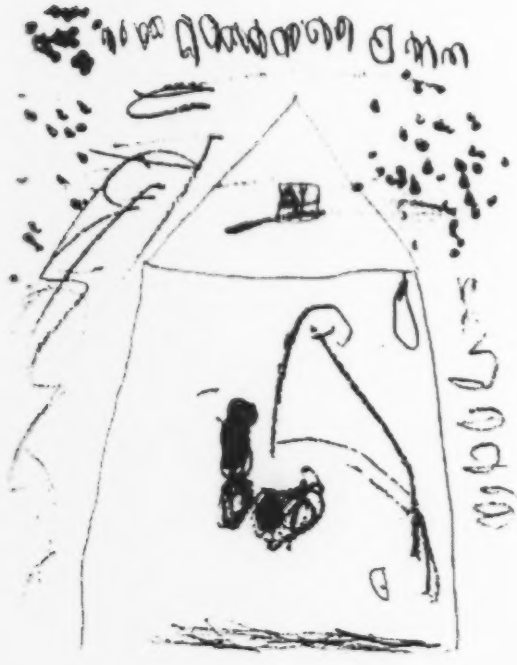
Endnotes [CONTINUED]

[9] Funding of emergency services for the state's most fragile families averaged $17.7 million yearly between 1987 and 1991, serving an average of 58,289 families each year; these outlays dropped to $5.3 million yearly between 1992 and 1995, serving 16,841 families annually. The funding level reduction for emergency assistance occurred with the elimination of the Emergency Needs Program [ENP] in late 1991 which provided critical assistance in basic need areas. The replacement State Emergency Relief [SER] program severely restricts eligibility and limits benefits, only helping families which can prove that they will have enough income in the future to prevent the emergency from recurring. Although a 50 percent federal match is available to the state to provide emergency assistance to families with children, Michigan has significantly reduced the federal funds it accesses through this program by not expending its own funds – the trigger for state receipt of the additional federal help available for families in an emergency situation.

[10] Only 2 percent of AFDC families in Michigan live in subsidized public housing compared to 9 percent in the nation. Nine of ten of Michigan's poorest children live in private housing with no subsidy.

[11] See endnote number 9 which outlines the scope of reductions in emergency assistance available to Michigan families with children.

[12] Thrasher and Mowbray; *op. cit.*



Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the homeless children and their mothers for their time, their courage and their efforts to help us understand the personal impact of conditions under which they are living. We appreciate their candor and spirit in telling us their stories. We hope that this report accurately portrays the strength and creativity with which they live their lives.

This report could not have been created without the cooperation of shelter providers who encouraged residents to participate in the study and shared many of their concerns about current conditions for the growing numbers of families with children who seek housing from the emergency shelters.

The editorial efforts of staff members at the Michigan League for Human Services – Ann Marston, Beverley McDonald, Sharon Parks, Michele Robotham and Jane Zehnder-Merrell – are deeply appreciated. The authors also thank the reviewers who offered thoughtful comments and suggestions on the final draft: Gail Allen, program and policy director, Association for Children's Mental Health; Margaret Crawley, program specialist, Michigan Community Coordinated Child Care Association; Helen Guzzo, executive director, Michigan Coalition Against Homelessness; Ellen Kisinger-Rothi, executive director, Housing Resources Family Shelter, Inc. in Kalamazoo; Pat Sorenson, vice president for policy, Michigan's Children; and Betty Tableman, director of Prevention Services, Michigan Department of Mental Health.

Children's drawings were provided by the Coalition on Temporary Shelters (COTS) in Detroit, Housing Resources Family Shelter in Kalamazoo, and Turning Point in Mount Clemens. A special thanks to Julie Fernandez of Metamora for preparing the drawings for printing. ■

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